

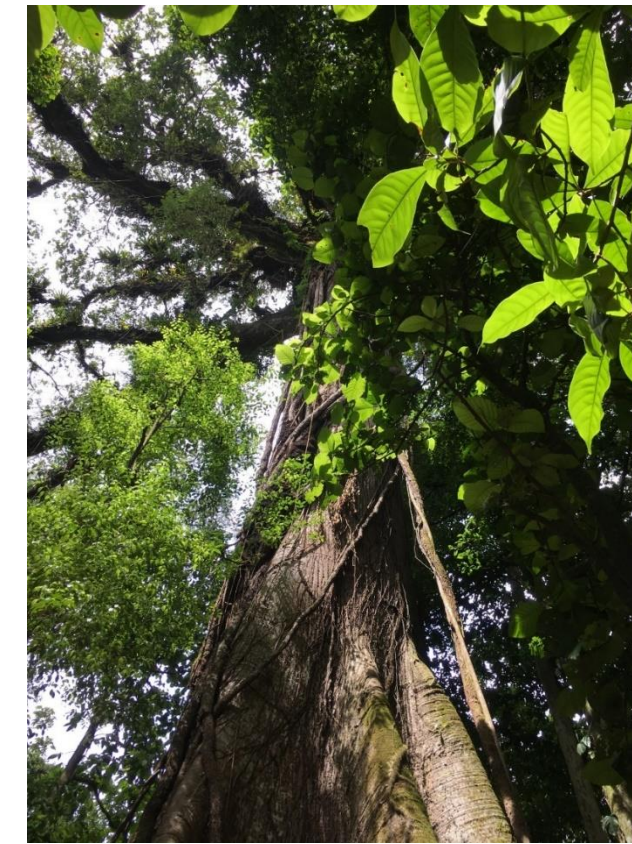
One valuable lesson I learned was to partake in Costa Rica's culture of rest. It's pretty obvious that Americans have forgotten how to rest. It's not bad that we value work ethic and productivity, but our society moves so fast that we miss out on the goodness of simply living life. While staying with our host families, we were given lots of time to rest, to take in the beautiful nature around us, to practice our Spanish and honor our hosts by communicating with them in their language, and simply witness the everyday life of a Tico in the country. We were able to play soccer with their grandson one night before dinner and then sit down to a meal all together and talk about the news of the day just like a regular family would. They lived the Costa Rican way of "pura vida" (pure life)- which means choosing to see the good in life, even amidst the struggles. "Pura vida" says don't take life too seriously, and that even when there is suffering, there can also still be joy. In preparation for this trip, I was expecting to leave exhausted and come back exhausted; however, I actually got a good amount of much needed rest thanks to the "pura vida" culture of Costa Rica.



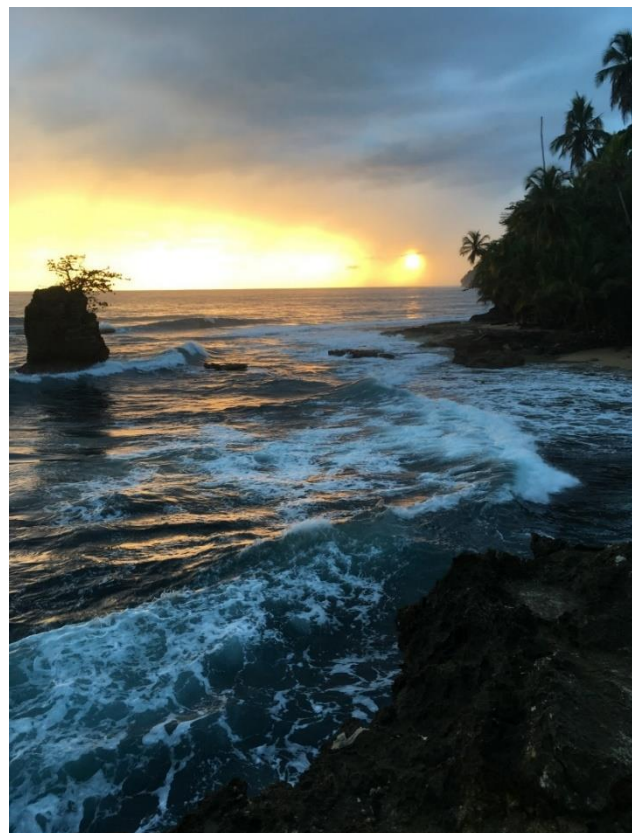
Personally, I gained a new mentality of sustainability after installing a biodigester made from old plastic buckets, bicycle tire rubber, used burlap sacks, and PBC pipe. From the outside looking in, many would assume that the family we were helping was too poor to buy the necessary new supplies; however, they chose to reuse those items on purpose because they were readily available, they would work just as well, and would contribute to their culture of sustainability. The man who was instructing us kept reminding us of this perspective throughout the project, explaining why each material was appropriate for the intended use, because he could see the slight judgement in our eyes. The biggest realization most students make, as I did, when they do service- not just abroad, but anywhere- is that the project changes and helps you more than you help the people you're "serving." I am now more aware of reusing items that I would have typically just thrown away.

Costa Rica Service Learning Program

This nine day service learning program spent the first half of the week focused on agricultural sustainability and the second half on cultural exploration and immersion. To learn about sustainability, we stayed at E.A.R.T.H. University (la Escuela de Agricultura de la Región Tropical Húmeda) touring compost and soil laboratories, livestock farms, experimental cacao plots, a commercial banana plantation, and a forest reserve. Later in the week, we stayed with host families in the rural community of la Argentina to complete several service projects and experience home-life on a farm. Finally, we visited Cahuita National Park and Volcán Arenal to sight-see and discover native animals like sloths, howler monkeys, snakes, lizards, and poison frogs.



In reference to my academic and personal life goals, this service learning experience furthered my desire to help others through my future profession. I chose to major in Food Science because of my love for science and cooking; however, agricultural sustainability is an entire side of Food Science I never considered before. After visiting E.A.R.T.H. University and completing service projects in rural Costa Rica, I gained valuable cultural and career experience related to agricultural development, sustainability, and crop production. For this reason, I hope to pursue a branch of food science that deals with food supply and agricultural sustainability to work towards stabilizing crop production and distribution to countries in need.



STEP
SECOND-YEAR TRANSFORMATIONAL
EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

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My favorite part of the trip was our excursion to la Fortuna and Arenal Volcano National Park. Volcán Arenal is a 5,357-foot volcano that has been considered active since 1968, even though it has not erupted since 2010. We were able to hike around the volcano, see the old lava flows, and take in the beauty of the lake and scenery surrounding it. Additionally, we were able to visit one of the many geothermal hot spring resorts in the region, Eco Termales Hot Springs. The geothermal hot springs are naturally heated from the volcano and nestled within thick forests, offering a relaxing end to a busy day of walking. One of the best memories by far was the night spent in the hot springs, under the canopy of the dense rainforest, listening to howler monkeys and birds in the trees and growing closer to the other students on the trip. It came at the end of a long week and continued to shape our new found "pura vida" mentality.



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